

Taking Back From the River

Recovery Operations on California's Turbulent Kern

by Hatch & Judy Graham

Senator Alan Cranston has reintroduced his bill to make 127 miles of the Kern River a wild and scenic river. In its lower reaches, the river may not qualify as wild in the legislative sense, but the term has more than one meaning.

On May 29, 1986, 43-year-old John Safian and friend Roberta McGill drove up from Sunland, near Los Angeles, to the Kern River just east of Bakersfield. They stopped at a spot 10 miles inside the mouth of the canyon.

"It's a swimming hole that a lot of people have used over the years," commented Lt. Carl Sparks, search and rescue coordinator for the Kern County Sheriff's Department. The water in the pool looked the same as in past years, in spite of unusually high run-off from big storms in February.

McGill said about 11 a.m. "it got so hot that we decided to go for a swim." They reached a rock just above the rapids, Sparks said, when Safian climbed onto a rock and tried to help McGill up. "She slipped on some moss under the surface, and when she slipped, she had hold of Safian's hand. They both went into the water."

McGill was pushed into a set of rocks. Safian, meanwhile, was swept to the left, into whitewater. A couple fishing nearby watched helplessly as "he went swirling down."

Arriving on scene, Kern County Search and Rescue discovered Safian missing and McGill on a rock surrounded by whitewater in the middle of the river. "It took us three or four hours to effect that rescue," Sparks recalled.

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Divers search a portion of a pool in the Kern River. Human bones were found on the other side of this pool.

"We made voice contact with her but she'd been on that rock for probably six hours, and she wanted to get off. She was cold—the water at that time was 52 degrees." One rescuer was assigned to maintain voice and visual contact with her.

Meanwhile, SAR personnel crossed the river and brought an Avon raft

across. Using a rope system, Sparks and two other rescuers moved with the raft to a flat rock, the first in the formation where McGill was stranded. "Until we got to that flat rock, we had no way of knowing what was on the other side," Sparks said. "There was radical whitewater between that rock, the next rock, and she was on the third rock. The span

Photo by Judy Graham

between the rocks was only about six feet, but if you went into that water, you were done."

They set up an overhead system, and one of the three, Tom Valentine, was able to reach McGill. He handed her a life vest connected to a safety line and assisted her into the raft. "We got about halfway between the flat rock and the shore," Sparks recalled, "and the rope system broke. We had a three-point anchor system set up with the rope across the river, and the downstream anchor gave way when the rock it was attached to moved. This caused the whole system to shift about four feet downstream. This dropped us down about eight feet, and the back of the boat was hanging over a waterfall. It was only about a four-foot waterfall, but there was enough water going over it that it could have flipped the boat and thrown everybody out. We set up another rope system, and the guys were able to pull us out."

McGill was finally brought safely ashore, but Safian—despite 12 searches along the banks—remained missing, presumed drowned.

Gouging out its course through a deep, rocky canyon from the high Sierra to California's Central Valley, the Kern normally runs 2,300 cubic feet per second. From its headwaters at 11,500 feet, the river drops to 2,600 feet at Lake Isabella—a drop of almost 9,000 feet in 83 miles. In the 18 miles from Lake Isabella to Democrat Hot Springs, a stretch known as the Royal Flush Rapids, there's another 480 feet of drop. From there to the power plant just inside the mouth of the canyon it drops to 990 feet elevation.

Throughout the length of the Kern Canyon, what may appear to be calm water is nevertheless headed downstream, and below every "calm" stretch is another set of rapids or falls. As McGill learned, just under the waterline the rocks are slick. An added danger is hypothermia. Fed by snowmelt, the river is barely above 50 degrees during much of the summer. Kern County Search and Rescue member/paramedic Rick Strasser commented, "If we don't get them out in three or four hours, they're probably not going to make it."

A dozen swimmers, fishermen and other recreationists, on average, have died in the Kern River every year.

Strasser points out that the hazards of the Kern have received considerable TV and newspaper coverage, particularly in the Los Angeles Basin, the home of so many of the river's victims, and as far away as San Francisco. "There's even been a country-western song written about it."

To warn visitors, some years ago a sign was posted at the mouth of the

canyon listing the number of drownings in the river since 1968. In spite of the sign, every year the total rose.

Fierce February storms accounted for even higher and swifter water than usual in the Kern during the summer of 1986. In early June, the river was running about 4000 cubic feet per second. John Safian became the fourth Kern River fatality that year, but he certainly wasn't the last. In fact, 1986 set a new record of 17 drownings.

On June 1, Mark Lawrence and Kathleen Carysfort, both 20 years old and residents of West Los Angeles, came to the same pool, 10 miles inside the mouth of the canyon, where Safian was killed. Both very athletic, Lawrence and Carysfort set out to swim across the river. "A fisherman at the scene said he saw them going across, swimming hand-in-hand," Sparks said. "And I don't know whether it was a cramp or what happened."

"They hit that same rock. Mark was able to get up on the rock. Same thing happened. She tried to get up, couldn't make it. He tried to save her, and she pulled him in the water."

Carysfort's body surfaced four days later, no more than half a mile below the pool. Lawrence, like Safian, remained missing.

Fifteen-year-old James Lopez of McFarland drowned Aug. 3 nine miles inside the mouth of the canyon. He was swimming with a friend, crossing a stretch of "fast-moving water, but not whitewater." A leg cramp incapacitated Lopez, and he was swept down into Class V whitewater. "When he got the cramp he started screaming for help," Sparks reported. "His friend went into the whitewater with him. And that is the first time that I have ever seen a person go through that set of rapids and come out alive. He was scratched up, but no broken bones, no concussion. He said the water just took him and turned him every way but loose. He was very fortunate." More fortunate than Lopez, who—like Safian and Lawrence—remained missing.

Nga Nguen, 18, and Khanh Do, 30, of Gardena drowned Aug. 31 two miles above Richbar Campground. "Nguen was sitting on a rock to have her picture taken. In the background was the turbulent Kern River. It was a beautiful picture. And the photographer asked her to move a little because she wasn't quite centered in the picture. She shifted a little bit and lost her balance. And then her boyfriend, Do, went in after her, and of course they both drowned."

By rigging up harness systems for leaning over banks, family members probed the water and eventually found Nguen's body. During their month-long vigil by the river, they also found what

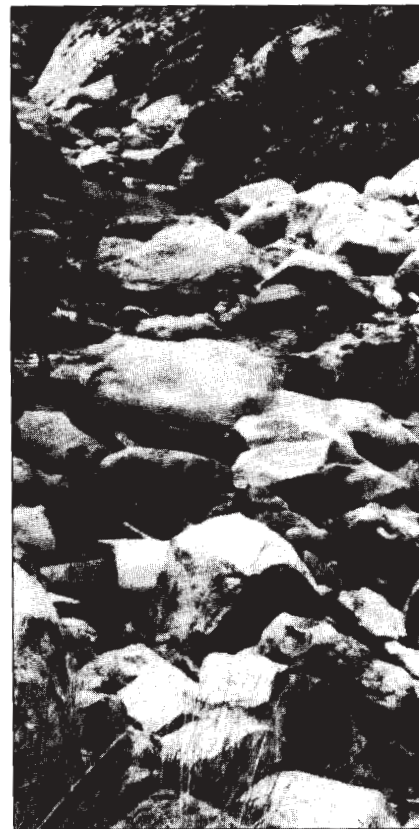


Photo by Judy Graham

A view of the boulder-strewn Kern Canyon—a short distance below the pool where John Safian, Mark Lawrence and Kathleen Carysfort drowned. This photo was taken during the Dec. 7 search, with water level much lower than normal.

appeared to be the body of Do.

"We couldn't put divers in because it was too turbulent," Strasser explained. "After the river went down slightly, they did some more investigation in that same place, and it wasn't his body. It was a log."

As 1986 came to a close, the *Bakersfield Californian* listed the Kern's victims in what was its deadliest year. In addition to the above, they were Robert Harmon, 31, of Bakersfield, drowned Mar. 22; Victor Zombrano, 27, May 24; Jose Gutierrez, 29, of Bakersfield, May 25; Rafael Munoz, 25, of Bakersfield, June 11; Dan Wayne Hickey, 35, of Bakersfield, June 25; Billy Rothgeb, 22, of Bakersfield, June 25; Robert O'Neal, 29, June 27; Arturo Montan, 13, of Los Angeles, July 7; Marcia Ripley, 36, of Bakersfield, Oct. 6, and Nancy Ann Lewis, 52, of Bakersfield, Oct. 10. The newspaper notes that the 17th (unnamed) victim died after being taken to a hospital.

Kern County Search and Rescue recovered the bodies of most of the victims soon after they drowned, but the search for the remaining four bodies in the canyon kept SAR members occupied for the entire summer and into the fall.

"We spent 1,039 man-hours searching

for them," SAR volunteer Greg Gonzales reported. "Fourteen weekends we went out and searched the riverbanks and went out in rafts. We were going out every weekend, between six and 35 Search and Rescue people, from June first to Sept. 20."

The Kern River doesn't make for easy searching. The same slick rocks and deceptively calm water that claimed the lives of so many recreationists presented hazards to rescuers as well. The current has carved out underwater caves and caverns that can trap a drowned body—or a searching diver.

During the many searches of the Kern between June and September, Kern County reimbursed its volunteers \$2549.40 for mileage to and from the river, and spent \$1155 to feed SAR members in the field.

Still, family members of the victims who remained missing didn't think enough was being done. Lawsuits against Kern County and the U.S. Forest Service, which manages much of the Kern watershed, began mounting. The *Bakersfield Californian* reported that relatives of Carysfort and Lawrence filed claims "charging that the river is 'negligently maintained, managed, controlled and operated.'"

Finally, the Sheriff's Department learned that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was going to reduce the outflow from Lake Isabella, above the stretch of water where the missing men had drowned, in order to work on several canals in the valley.

"They will not drop the water for you to find a body," Sparks explained. "That water is used for agriculture down below; in the middle of summer they irrigate cotton every six days, and if it goes one more day it starts to wilt." USACE's plans in early December to shut down the flow from Lake Isabella afforded a rare chance to search the river at low-water.

A massive search was planned for Sunday, Dec. 7, when the water level would be down. SAR units from throughout the large county were called, and California Rescue Dog Association was asked to provide dog teams.

(Kern County had lost its only operational dog team when CARDA handler Ray Bockman and his dog Kelly died—with pilot Douglas Moonen and Sgt. Marvin Kline—in an August 1986 plane crash; they were on a training exercise searching for drowning victims on the Kern.)

"We've had such good luck with search dogs in the canal (finding drowning victims)," Sparks commented. CARDA was able to send one airscent dog team from Northern California to assist in the Dec. 7 assault on the Kern.

Rick Strasser, who coordinated the callout, commented, "I made the phone calls, got the people lined up. And when I got into the valley that morning it was pouring rain and sleet. I thought, 'we're not going to have anybody.'"

He was wrong. At the early-morning briefing at Richbar Campground on Dec. 7 were 108 volunteers from Kern

County SAR units—Bakersfield, Kern Valley, Tehachapi, Boron, Indian Wells Valley, Taft, Frazier Park and China Lake Mountain Rescue Group—as well as 12 Kern County divers and the CARDA dog team. Also present were a five-man cook crew, a coroner, public information officers to deal with the media and family members of the drowned men. Also, a local ambulance company volunteered to stand by in case medical assistance should be needed during the all-day search.

This was the first time that Kern County had used the Incident Command System for a SAR operation, and Strasser, who was familiar with ICS through his work as a paramedic, assisted in setting up the ICS structure. He also served as plans chief and, later, took charge of the morgue. Jim Hurst, commander of Bakersfield SAR, and Dwayne Kirkham, commander of Kern Valley SAR, served jointly as operations chief.

In the briefing, the Incident Commander, Lt. Sparks, outlined his plan: with nine miles of river to cover—from the whitewater where Safian and Lawrence disappeared, down to a power generation plant just inside the mouth of the canyon—the search would concentrate first on the most likely five miles. Foot searchers would be split into 10 teams, each with a team leader familiar with the river and with searching for drowned bodies. Two teams were assigned to each one-mile stretch of river, with one team to work upstream and the other downstream, thus giving double coverage and ensuring that the water would be viewed from both directions.

He instructed the foot teams to look under and among the boulders, and probe the water. "You'll have to get right down by the river to do a thorough job," he said. But he cautioned that safety was the primary consideration. "I don't want any boulder-hopping," he stressed. "Those rocks are slick."

Searchers discovered he was right. The unusually low water level exposed rocks that for years had been accumulating a coating of moss and super-slick silt. One volunteer described the shoreline search as "trying to climb up a slide smeared with margarine."

While foot crews covered the riverbanks, divers were to search the large, deep pools, starting just below where Safian and Lawrence disappeared. The CARDA dog team was assigned an Avon raft with crew, to work in conjunction with the divers; the dog was to try to detect human scent coming from underwater. Accompanying the dog team as an observer was Susie Gonzales, an off-duty Kern County coroner investigator who is also a member of Kern County SAR and a CARDA trainee.



Photo by Judy Gramam

The CARDA dog and a foot searcher make their way over slick rocks during the Dec. 7 search.

Just 20 minutes into the search, a foot crew searching two miles above the Richbar Campground command post spotted the body of Khanh Do, lying above the low-water line.

With divers searching the pool below where Safian and Lawrence drowned, the dog team began a shoreline check just downstream. Working over and around the slick boulders at the water's edge, the German Shepherd began alerting, whining and gazing toward the water but refusing to go in. ("That dog loves to swim," the handler commented. "She must know the Kern isn't safe for swimming.")

Recognizing the alert, the observer called for divers. At about 11:00 a.m., one of the divers, investigating an underwater crevice in the area of the dog's alert, signaled a find. The body was so tightly wedged up into a cavern in the rocks that it had to be pried free. The diver noted, that, since it wasn't on the bottom, he might have missed it, had it not been for the dog's alert. This proved to be the body of John Safian, held underwater for more than six months.

Divers moved to the next pool down, and found human arm and leg bones. The CARDA team then boarded the raft to search this pool. The dog gave a mild alert in the area where the bones were recovered, and a stronger alert across the pool at a narrow channel between

granite cliffs and a boulder-island. Divers searched here but could find nothing. They reported that the channel had apparently shifted and remains could easily be buried under sand. Nothing more was found in this pool during the day's search. A pathologist reported that the recovered longbones were from a male and had not been in the river for more than a year; however, a positive identification could not be made.

Later, divers searching downstream located the body of James Lopez underwater, about a mile and a half down from where he went in. After Lopez disappeared, divers had spent two days in a futile search of the pool where his friend ended up, considerably upstream from where Lopez was finally recovered. As Sparks commented, "you just never know what that river's going to do."

"We used to be able to say, until last summer, that bodies would come up within 14 days, and they'd be within three miles of where they went in. But after this summer, we can't say that. Now we have to say 'well, they may come up, and then it may be six months before we find them.'"

The massive Dec. 7 search cost Kern County Sheriff's Department \$1700 for gasoline for its volunteers and \$500 for Saturday night dinner and Sunday breakfast and lunch for searchers, as well as overtime for paid deputies on scene.

In all, the day-long assault on the Kern yielded three of the four missing bodies; the human arm and leg bones, and several old skull fragments that Sparks conjectured might belong to a young girl who drowned in 1983; but the fragments were too small to be positively identified.

Finding three of the four missing bodies was success beyond the wildest hope of searchers, who felt they'd be lucky if they found even one. The combination of low water, a large turnout of trained searchers, and effective use of the various search resources—foot crews, divers, airscent search dog team, and raft—forced the Kern to give up a few more of its victims.

Unfortunately, it was much too late to save their lives. That's another matter; there's a need for preventative SAR, to try to prevent future drownings. In the case of the Kern, it sometimes appears to be a losing battle, since posted warning signs and media coverage haven't reduced the number of fatalities.

The *Bakersfield Californian* quoted Mark Lawrence's family: "every day that we came here to look (for him), there were people in the water. We saw boys diving off rocks. (We said) 'Hey, my brother's down there. You shouldn't go in.'" Mark Lawrence was only the Kern's sixth victim in 1986; there were 10 more after him. □